

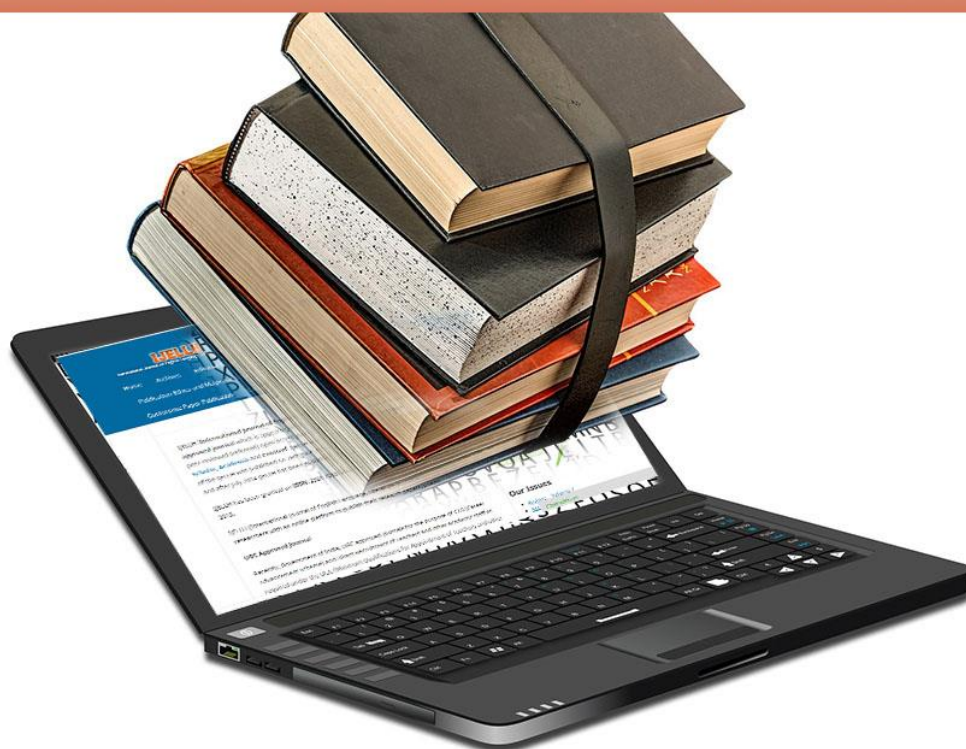
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Transcending Oppression: A Study of Gloria Naylor's Fiction

Evolution of America as a developed and the most powerful nation of the world presents a very interesting account of the journey of a nation. July 4, 1776 was the day that marked the dawn of United States of America as an independent nation. George Washington, who had headed the American war of independence, became the first President of the country. During the 19th century the United States began to expand in the West and became industrialized. In 1861 many Southern States left the United States to start a new country called the Confederate States of America. This resulted in the American civil war. In fact, it is after the civil war that America became the country that it is today. Large scale immigration from all countries of the world started to the land of opportunities, after the civil war.

It would be pertinent to briefly ponder over the major reasons behind the American civil war. A perpetual conflict between industry and farming, rights of the states, Westward expansion, Violence in Kansas, Secession and most importantly slavery formed the crux of civil war. From the point of view of the present proposed research, two issues – the conflict between industries, farming and slavery are contextually significant.

In the middle of the nineteenth century the economies of many Northern States had shifted to industry from farming. It resulted in a large scale migration to larger cities like New York, Philadelphia and Boston. On the contrary the Southern States continued with their large

agricultural and farming economy and this type of economy relied heavily on slave labours. This created a contrasting situation –The Northern States no longer needed slaves while the Southern States needed slaves imperatively for their way of life. Most of the people in the North began to believe that slavery was immoral and cruel. This group came to be known as abolitionists and they wanted slavery to be declared illegal throughout the United States. This created fear in the hearts and minds of the people in the South that their way of life and livelihood would be endangered. Afro-American psyche has struggled for human dignity and independence. Molefi Kete Asante writes, “Our psychology was therefore, formed on the margins of the Promise” (23). The differences in culture, class, color and gender have been used by one group to subordinate the other.

It is indeed true that slavery was abolished after the civil war and was declared illegal but it is an ironical fact that official proclamations seldom result in desired social changes. Though slavery was abolished but even then it remained continually connected with womanhood. Gloria Naylor in her novels has given a subtle account of the subjugation of blacks even in the 20th century America. She has vividly portrayed social issues like homophobia, racism, poverty and discrimination. Gloria Naylor succeeds in depicting the black woman’s survival and sufferings through her works. She wants to instill the awareness of self-definition in the minds of the black women. As a critic Audre Lorde says, “If we do not define ourselves for ourselves we will be defined by others” (45).

Gloria Naylor was born on 25th January, 1950 in New York. She was the oldest child of Roosevelt Naylor and Alberta McAlpin. Her father was a transit worker and her mother was a telephone operator. In the year 1963 Gloria’s family shifted to Queens. From the outset Gloria was an excellent student and she was fascinated by the works of nineteenth century British novelists. She was deeply aggrieved by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Junior when she was in her teen years. This made her postpone her college education. In the beginning

Gloria was aspiring for a nursing career. It was at this time that she switched to English from nursing. Bell Hooks has rightly marked out that black women must make use of their marginality and, "... make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well to envision and create counter-hegemony" (15).

Born to black parents and that too as female must have really made her an insider into the sufferings and setbacks suffered by the blacks. Gloria Naylor reiterates her view about the repositioning of black literature in America's mainstream in the following words:

I am a black female writer and I have no qualms whatsoever with people saying that I'm a black female writer. What I take umbrage with is the fact that some might try to use that identity—that which is me—as a way my material and my output. I am female and black and American. No buts are in that identity. Now you go off and do the work to somehow broaden yourself so you understand what America is really about. Because it's about me. (Arana 258).

The Naylor who had been living in Robinson Ville, Mississippi migrated to Harlem to avoid the segregated life in the South and seek new opportunities in New York City. The earliest influence on Gloria was of her mother. She herself had little education but even then she encouraged Gloria to read and keep a Journal. During the interview with Donna Perry, Gloria Naylor says, "I think I kept writing as a child because I had my mother as a model... I think I kept going through her" (219-20). It was due to her mother's formative influence that she started writing profusely. She began to feel that in the world of literature there is no place for black women till the time she read Toni Morrison's novel "The Bluest Eye" which transformed her belief and life. Long years of oppression and brutal slavery taught the black women how to face the society. They learned how to utilize their own bitter experiences for a better future.

The history of Black women is a saga of suffering and agony. Black women have succeeded in coming out of the shadow of oppression. More than twenty millions of blacks

arrived in America in 1619 and the ships in which they were brought introduced them to their future full of oppression. Mostly the black women were brought for giving company to white males. There was only one saving grace for them that they were more valuable than their male counterparts and so were not sold so often as male slaves. However with the passage of time their plight improved. They began to study and make a mark for themselves. It is evident that the sorry state of Blacks and particularly the black women troubled and tormented Gloria Naylor greatly. However in her novels she has striven to show a way out of this labyrinth of oppression and suffering. In fact her characters become a symbol of doggedness and hope for oppressed blacks at large.

Feminism originated because of the wrong treatment of women at the hands of men in the society. It was a movement which sought to redress the grievances of women, aimed at advancing the position of women. The fundamental aim of Black feminism is to provide humane conditions to the community. It is a self motivated striving to attain empowerment. The time which elapsed between Slavery and Freedom helped the black women to build a definite point of view on the various types of oppression they had faced. They became familiar with all types of oppression like sexism, racism and classicism and it actually helped them to establish their own human identity. They visualized a future full of equality, impartiality and justice not only for their community but also for all humans at large. Black feminism actually concentrates on such thoughts which are against racism, elitism and sexism. Bell hooks in her book “Ain’t I a Woman?” (1981) explains the feminist consciousness in the following way:

We black women who advocate feminist ideology, are pioneers. We are creating a past for ourselves and our sisters. We hope that as they see us reach our goal - no longer victimized, no longer unrecognized, no longer afraid - they will take courage and follow. (196)

Black feminism is “a self-conscious process of struggle propelling women and men towards a more harmonic vision of community” (Collins). It is with this Black feminist theory, the writers have tried both pragmatically and analytically to understand and dismantle the racial and gender oppressions. This movement of black feminism had the following four basic themes as its guiding principles – the legacy of struggle, the search for voice, the interdependence of thought and action and the significance of empowerment in everyday life

This research paper seeks to study Gloria Naylor’s novels as a study of ‘Transcending Oppression’. The Oxford Dictionary explains oppression “as prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or exercise of authority”. It also implies ill treatment, suppression, subjugation, enslavement or exploitation. The novels of Gloria Naylor bring to fore the atrocities suffered by black women. Her concern for the black women is uppermost in her works.

The Women of Brewster Place is her first novel that was written in 1982. The novel is actually based on the lives of African American women. These women are soft-centered, hard-edged, easily pleased and brutally demanding. Each of their lives has been probed in several short stories. Their stories narrate the ups and downs of many black women and agonies they face in life. This novel is narrated in seven stories. Six stories are focused on individual characters and the seventh story is about the whole community. The major characters of each chapter are all women and residents of Brewster place. It is a housing development located in an unnamed city. The inmates are victims of forced prostitution, gang rapes and exploitation while they live at Brewster place.

Linden Hills is the second novel published in 1985. Here Naylor portrays the other extreme of contemporary black life, set in an affluent black suburb. In sharp contrast to Brewster Place this novel is dominated by men. The novelist derives her allegory from Dante’s *Inferno*. It is actually a revision of her Yale master’s thesis. She has written it from the perspective of a third person depicting various characters based on different traits that

correspond with different rings of Dante's Integration of Hell. The further down the hill side one goes, the richer the residents become signifying and alluding that the higher they reach in the socio-economic hierarchy, the lower they sink in the spiritual order. The symbolism seems to point out that America is a dead society. This fact gains further strength by the fact that an undertaker presides over Linden Hills which throws a certain pall over the suburb. Women are particularly ill-treated in Linden Hills and they are expendable and exploited.

Mama Day is her third novel published in 1988. The novelist makes several allusions to the drama of Shakespeare focusing upon the tragic love affair of the protagonists. The novel deals with magic and supernatural powers and is set on a secluded island. Briefly, it can be safely said that the narrative of *Mama Day* is a quest for identity and an attempt to blend her secret past with the future.

Bailey's Café is her fourth novel published in 1992. The novel is a collection of loosely knit group of stories. Bailey's Café is apparently a supernatural establishment set in New York City. Despite the urban setting of the café the patron enters and wanders in it from different places and times. The story narrates a magical place and the lost souls in search of redemption and in the form of café they find at least a safe heaven. It focuses on the tragic stories of women who suffered deeply. The novel narrates about a woman who hates men because of the oppression she has suffered.

She returns back to Brewster Place in her fifth novel *The Men of Brewster Place* published in 1999. She in no way justifies the treatment of women by the men but through the voices of major characters the patriarchy strives for some kind of redemption. She depicts how man and woman are inseparable and how they complement each other. They both are victims of oppression and fear.

The last novel of Gloria Naylor is *1996* published in 2005. This novel is indeed personal and her own tale of emotional oppression. She herself commented that it is a narrative about

her own loss of privacy in this country. It is really ironical that a country like America which places the right to privacy of its citizens as the uppermost is being alleged by one of its own prominent writers to have violated her individuality.

To sum up we may say that Naylor portrays the journey of black women from their state of depression and oppression to a state of hope and optimism. She shows her characters towards self-realization, identity and self-dignity. Naylor, here, raises a voice against the subjugation of women and we also see her close concern for their struggle for survival and existence.

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